

Public Relations and Neoliberalism: A Complex Interplay

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Date of submission: 20/05/2023; Acceptance date: 30/09/2023; Publication date : 20/12/2023

Abstract: This article explores the intersection of public relations (PR) and neoliberalism, examining the significant influence neoliberal principles have had on PR practices, public-private partnerships (PPPs), and PR education. Drawing upon extensive research, it illustrates the ways in which neoliberal ideologies have shaped PR strategies and the delivery of public services, while also molding the educational landscape for aspiring PR professionals. However, the article also highlights the manifold criticisms of this intersection, primarily concerning the potential manipulation of public opinion, the perpetuation of power imbalances, and the ethical considerations these practices raise. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for a critical and socially responsible approach to PR within the neoliberal context. Future PR practices must balance the demands of a competitive global economy with the ethical obligations towards public transparency, accountability, and democratic processes.

Keywords: Public Relations, Neoliberalism, Public-Private Partnership, Power Imbalances, Democratic Processes.

Résumé : Cet article explore l'intersection des relations publiques (RP) et du néolibéralisme, en examinant l'influence significative que les principes néolibéraux ont eu sur les pratiques de RP, les partenariats public-privé (PPP) et l'éducation en RP. S'appuyant sur des recherches approfondies, il illustre la manière dont les idéologies néolibérales ont façonné les stratégies de relations publiques et la prestation de services publics, tout en façonnant le paysage éducatif des futurs professionnels des relations publiques. Cependant, l'article met également en lumière les multiples critiques de ce carrefour, concernant principalement la manipulation potentielle de l'opinion publique, la perpétuation des déséquilibres de pouvoir et les considérations éthiques que ces pratiques soulèvent. L'article conclut en soulignant la nécessité d'une approche critique et socialement responsable des relations publiques dans le contexte néolibéral. Les futures pratiques de relations publiques doivent équilibrer les exigences d'une économie mondiale compétitive avec les obligations éthiques envers la transparence publique, la responsabilité et les processus démocratiques.

Mots clés : relations publiques, néolibéralisme, partenariat public-privé, déséquilibres de pouvoir, processus démocratiques.

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Introduction:

The intersection of public relations and neoliberalism offers a unique perspective on how communication is managed in a market-oriented society. As neoliberalism commodifies information, PR professionals find themselves at the center of this transformation, tasked with shaping and distributing this valuable commodity. The marketization of information has fundamentally changed how we perceive and interact with information, making it a product to be consumed (Castells, 2009). PR professionals not only craft the message but also manage its dissemination, giving them a significant role in this new information landscape.

Furthermore, neoliberalism's emphasis on deregulation has had significant implications for crisis management, a key component of public relations. The financial crises and environmental disasters of the past few decades have been attributed, at least in part, to neoliberal policies that favor deregulation (Klein, 2007). Such crises necessitate sophisticated public relations strategies to manage public perception and mitigate damage to corporate reputations. In a world where a single crisis can tarnish a corporation's image overnight, effective crisis communication becomes a lifeline.

Public Relations (PR) and neoliberalism, two seemingly disparate fields, are intertwined in numerous intricate ways. Public Relations is a practice that navigates the complex dynamics between an organization and its publics, aiming to foster a positive image and manage communication effectively (Grunig, 2000). On the other hand, neoliberalism, a term coined by the economist Friedrich Hayek (1944), is a political and economic ideology advocating for limited state intervention, open markets, and individual responsibility as the primary drivers of economic growth.

The ascendancy of neoliberal thinking since the late 20th century has brought about significant implications for the practice of public relations. The market-oriented view of neoliberalism has commodified information, making the management of communication an increasingly critical function (Moloney, 2006). Simultaneously, the neoliberal agenda's propensity for deregulation has precipitated numerous corporate crises, requiring strategic crisis communication and management from PR practitioners (Coombs, 2007).

The power dynamics between corporations, stakeholders, and the public have also been dramatically influenced by neoliberalism. As corporations gain power under neoliberal policies, they become major players in shaping societal narratives (Chomsky, 1999). Public relations is at the forefront of this shift, as it is tasked with legitimizing corporate actions, maintaining a social license to operate, and negotiating the delicate balance of power between corporations and their various publics. Neoliberalism's encouragement of public-private partnerships (PPPs) creates another avenue where public relations plays a crucial role. Such partnerships are often promoted as a win-win solution, combining the efficiency of the private sector with the accountability of the public sector. Yet, these partnerships can also give rise to controversies and conflicts, necessitating effective PR strategies to manage these potential issues (Hodge & Greve, 2007).

Moreover, under neoliberal policies, corporations have gained immense influence, leading to an increased demand for public relations to manage corporate reputation and legitimize their actions (Deephouse, 2000). Lastly, neoliberalism's encouragement of public-private partnerships (PPPs) calls for effective PR strategies to communicate the benefits of these partnerships and manage potential controversies (L'Etang, 2008).

However, the interplay between PR and neoliberalism has also drawn criticism. Many argue that, under neoliberalism's influence, PR may serve the interests of the powerful, manipulating

public opinion and obscuring the realities of corporate power and neoliberal policies (Miller & Dinan, 2008).

This relationship between PR and neoliberalism is not without its detractors. Critics argue that PR serves as a tool for the powerful, enabling them to manipulate public opinion and obscure the realities of corporate power and neoliberal policies (Miller & Dinan, 2008). This criticism calls into question the role of public relations in a neoliberal society and the ethical implications that arise from it. This article delves into the complex relationship between public relations and neoliberalism, exploring how they have shaped and influenced each other, while also considering the critical perspectives on their intersection.

1. The Marketization of Information:

The commodification or marketization of information is one of the most significant implications of the neoliberal worldview on public relations. As Castells (2009) explains, in the era of the information society, data and information become products to be bought, sold, and consumed. This change has led to the emergence of an economy where knowledge and information are the key sources of productivity and power.

In this new paradigm, PR professionals find themselves as the architects of information commodities. They are the ones shaping and packaging information in ways that appeal to various publics, be it consumers, stakeholders, or the wider public (Moloney, 2006). In essence, PR professionals have become information brokers, managing the flow of information from organizations to their publics.

For instance, corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports, once an obscure document, have become a vital tool for companies to communicate their ethical and sustainable practices. These reports are often crafted by PR professionals who package information in a way that highlights the company's commitment to social and environmental issues (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Similarly, PR professionals play a key role in managing an organization's online presence, from its official website to its social media profiles. They are responsible for shaping the narrative about the organization in the digital sphere, a vital task in an age where public opinion can be swayed by a single viral post (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

However, critics argue that the marketization of information under neoliberalism can lead to an oversimplification or distortion of reality. As PR professionals aim to craft appealing narratives, there is a risk that complex issues may be reduced to soundbites or that negative information may be downplayed or omitted entirely (Davis, 2002).

The emergence of PR professionals as information brokers in this neoliberal age is not confined to the corporate world. Public sector organizations, non-profits, and even political entities have increasingly relied on PR strategies to shape and manage the information they disseminate.

In the political sphere, for instance, PR techniques play a pivotal role in how policies are communicated and framed. Political actors use public relations to "sell" their policies to the public, crafting messages that emphasize the benefits of their initiatives while often downplaying potential drawbacks (Lilleker, 2006).

This approach is particularly evident during election campaigns, where PR professionals manage candidates' images, control campaign messaging, and respond to opponents' attacks. The rise of digital technology has further amplified the role of PR in managing information. Today's digital landscape is characterized by a constant flow of information, much of which is unfiltered and uncensored. In this environment, PR practitioners must not only shape the

narrative but also monitor and respond to the public's reactions in real time (Breakenridge, 2008).

However, the marketization of information also presents ethical challenges. As Davis (2002) notes, the need to appeal to the market can lead to a situation where information is selectively presented or even manipulated to fit a certain narrative. Critics argue that this could potentially undermine the democratic process, as it hampers the public's ability to make informed decisions.

Moreover, the marketization of information can exacerbate inequalities in the information society. As Couldry and Turow (2014) point out, those who can afford to pay for PR services can control the narrative, while those who cannot may find their voices marginalized. This raises important questions about the role of PR in promoting or challenging power structures in a neoliberal society.

In conclusion, the marketization of information under neoliberalism has significantly transformed the field of public relations. PR professionals have become central actors in this new landscape, tasked with shaping, managing, and marketing information. However, this development also raises critical ethical and democratic concerns that need to be addressed.

2. Crisis Management

In the realm of public relations, crisis management is a critical function that has been heavily influenced by neoliberalism. As neoliberal policies often advocate for deregulation and laissez-faire economics, they have, at times, precipitated crises that require adept crisis communication and management.

Crisis management in PR refers to the strategies employed by organizations to communicate with the public and their stakeholders during emergencies or unfavorable situations. This could range from product recalls, environmental disasters, financial downturns, or scandals that have the potential to damage an organization's reputation (Coombs, 2007).

Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on deregulation and market autonomy, can inadvertently foster environments where such crises are more likely to occur. For instance, the financial crisis of 2007-2008 has been partially attributed to neoliberal policies that favored deregulation, enabling risky financial practices that ultimately led to a global economic meltdown (Klein, 2007).

In such scenarios, PR practitioners are called upon to manage the crisis and mitigate its impact on the organization's reputation. They are tasked with crafting messages that explain the situation, demonstrate the organization's response, and express empathy towards those affected. These efforts are crucial in preserving public trust and maintaining the organization's social license to operate (Coombs, 2014).

An example of such crisis management in action can be seen in the BP oil spill in 2010. Following the disaster, BP launched a significant PR campaign to manage the crisis, which included public apologies, updates on cleanup efforts, and assurances of commitment to preventing future incidents (Pompper, 2012).

However, critics argue that neoliberalism's influence on PR can lead to an overemphasis on image management in crisis situations, at the expense of substantive action. They contend that organizations, under the neoliberal model, might prioritize restoring their public image over addressing the root causes of the crisis (Peck, 2010).

In conclusion, crisis management under neoliberalism presents both opportunities and challenges for PR professionals. While it reinforces the importance of PR in managing corporate reputation, it also raises ethical questions about the role of PR in addressing the fallout from neoliberal policies.

Digital technology has added another layer of complexity to crisis management in a neoliberal age. In the era of social media, crises can unfold and escalate rapidly, leaving organizations scrambling to respond (Eriksson, 2018). As such, PR practitioners must be adept at navigating digital platforms, monitoring online sentiment, and responding in real time.

This shift has led to the emergence of what Coombs (2014) terms as "online crisis management". This involves the use of digital tools and platforms to manage crises, from issuing statements on social media to monitoring online conversations and responding to public queries or concerns. Online crisis management demands a level of immediacy, transparency, and interactivity that traditional crisis management strategies may lack.

An example of online crisis management can be seen in the way airlines respond to incidents. When a video of a passenger being forcibly removed from an overbooked United Airlines flight went viral in 2017, the company had to respond swiftly and publicly. Their initial response, which was widely perceived as lacking empathy and responsibility, led to a public outcry. The incident highlighted the power of social media in escalating crises and the importance of an effective online crisis management strategy (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). The ability to manage crises effectively in the digital age is not evenly distributed. Larger corporations with more resources can employ sophisticated online crisis management strategies, while smaller organizations may struggle to respond effectively. This disparity can exacerbate the power imbalances inherent in neoliberalism, where the voices of powerful corporations are amplified, and those of less powerful entities are marginalized (Couldry & Turow, 2014).

Moreover, the emphasis on image management in crisis situations raises ethical concerns. Critics argue that PR, under neoliberal influence, can be used to deflect blame or obscure the underlying issues that led to the crisis. This "spin" can prevent meaningful change or reform, perpetuating the conditions that allowed the crisis to occur in the first place (Moloney, 2006). In conclusion, the role of PR in crisis management under neoliberalism is complex and multifaceted. While PR practitioners are integral to managing crises and protecting an organization's reputation, the neoliberal context in which they operate presents significant ethical and practical challenges.

The evolving landscape of crisis management also points to the growing importance of pre-crisis planning in PR strategies. In the face of potential crises, organizations are increasingly recognizing the value of being prepared. Proactive strategies include identifying potential risks, developing crisis response plans, training spokespersons, and establishing a crisis communication team (Coombs, 2015).

These strategies not only help organizations respond effectively when a crisis hits but also serve to protect and even enhance their reputation in the long run. A well-handled crisis can demonstrate an organization's commitment to transparency, accountability, and its stakeholders, which can contribute to building trust and goodwill (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2015).

However, the neoliberal emphasis on deregulation and market efficiency can sometimes conflict with these proactive strategies. As corporations are driven to maximize profits, they may neglect investments in risk management and crisis preparedness. This short-term focus on profitability can leave organizations vulnerable to crises and exacerbate their impact when they do occur (Klein, 2007).

The role of PR in crisis management also extends to post-crisis communication. After a crisis, organizations must work to repair their reputation and rebuild trust with their stakeholders. PR practitioners play a crucial role in this phase, communicating the organization's remedial

actions, expressing commitment to prevent future incidents, and maintaining open lines of communication with stakeholders (Coombs, 2007).

Yet, this aspect of crisis management can also be influenced by neoliberal pressures. Critics argue that the emphasis on image restoration can lead to superficial changes that do not address the root causes of the crisis. This focus on managing perceptions rather than effecting substantive change can perpetuate systemic issues and lead to recurring crises (Peck, 2010).

In conclusion, the influence of neoliberalism on crisis management in public relations is multifaceted and complex. While it underscores the importance of PR in managing crises, it also presents challenges that can compromise the effectiveness and ethics of crisis communication.

3. Neoliberalism and the Democratization of Public Relations

The influence of neoliberalism on public relations extends beyond the corporate sphere and crisis management. Neoliberalism, coupled with the rise of digital technology, has also contributed to the democratization of public relations, allowing more individuals and groups to participate in shaping public discourse.

In the traditional model of PR, professionals served as gatekeepers, controlling the flow of information from organizations to their publics. However, with the advent of the internet and social media, this model has been disrupted. Today, anyone with an internet connection can potentially reach a global audience, by passing traditional gatekeepers (Grunig, 2009).

This shift has had significant implications for public relations. Organizations can now engage directly with their stakeholders, without the mediation of traditional media. This enables more interactive and personalized communication, fostering closer relationships between organizations and their publics (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Moreover, the democratization of PR has enabled new voices to enter the public discourse. Non-profit organizations, social movements, and even individual activists can use digital platforms to raise awareness, mobilize support, and influence policy. This has been seen in movements ranging from the Arab Spring to Black Lives Matter, where social media played a crucial role in organizing protests and disseminating information (Tufekci, 2017).

However, the democratization of PR under neoliberalism also presents challenges. While it allows more voices to be heard, it also leads to an information overload, making it harder for any single message to stand out (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). This has led to the rise of "attention economy", where the success of a PR campaign is often measured by its ability to capture and retain public attention (Goldhaber, 1997).

Furthermore, the democratization of PR does not necessarily level the playing field. Large corporations and powerful individuals can still exert significant influence over public discourse, thanks to their resources and established platforms. This can lead to a situation where the voices of marginalized groups are drowned out, despite the theoretical openness of digital platforms (Fuchs, 2014).

On the other hand, the democratization of PR has given rise to a form of "citizen PR" where individuals and groups can leverage digital platforms to hold powerful entities accountable. Citizen journalism, online activism, and social media whistleblowing are all examples of this trend, where ordinary citizens can influence public discourse and effect change (Bruno & Nielsen, 2012).

This form of PR is inherently democratic, as it empowers individuals to share their perspectives, challenge dominant narratives, and mobilize support for causes they believe in. The #MeToo movement, for instance, saw individuals leveraging social media to share their

experiences of sexual harassment and assault, leading to a global conversation about gender inequality and systemic abuse (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018).

Neoliberalism also influences the democratization of PR by promoting competition and innovation in the digital sphere. This competitive environment encourages the development of new platforms, tools, and strategies for communication, further expanding the possibilities for PR practice (Holt & Denegri-Knott, 2009).

However, the democratization of PR also presents ethical challenges. As PR practices become more widespread, the risk of misinformation, manipulation, and unethical communication also increases. This "dark side" of PR democratization is exemplified by phenomena such as online trolling, fake news, and digital propaganda, which can distort public discourse and undermine democratic processes (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017).

Moreover, the democratization of PR can exacerbate inequalities in the digital sphere. While digital technology theoretically allows anyone to participate in public discourse, access to these technologies is still unevenly distributed. Digital divide, which refers to the gap between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not, can marginalize certain voices and perspectives, undermining the democratic potential of PR democratization (Van Dijk, 2006).

Another aspect of the democratization of public relations under neoliberalism is the rise of influencer marketing. Influencers, often individuals who have amassed a large following on social media, have emerged as powerful actors in the PR landscape. They can shape public opinion, promote products or causes, and even influence policy debates (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011).

Influencer marketing is an example of how neoliberal values, such as individual entrepreneurship and market competition, have permeated the field of PR. Influencers often position themselves as independent voices, offering authentic opinions and recommendations to their followers. This authenticity, coupled with the trust and rapport they build with their audience, make them effective communicators and persuaders (Abidin, 2016).

However, the rise of influencer marketing also raises ethical and regulatory concerns. Issues such as undisclosed sponsorships, deceptive advertising, and the commodification of personal relationships have come to the forefront, prompting calls for more stringent regulation and ethical guidelines in this space (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017).

The democratization of PR has also led to the blurring of boundaries between professional and amateur practitioners. In the age of social media, anyone can potentially engage in PR activities, whether it's promoting a product, advocating for a cause, or managing a crisis. This can lead to a proliferation of voices and perspectives, but it can also result in misinformation, unethical communication, and the erosion of professional standards (Breakenridge, 2008).

Moreover, the democratization of PR does not automatically translate into a more equitable distribution of power. While digital platforms may provide a voice to marginalized groups, they do not necessarily give them the resources or platforms needed to be heard. In fact, the concentration of digital resources in the hands of a few corporations can exacerbate existing power imbalances and inequalities (Fenton & Barassi, 2011).

In conclusion, the democratization of PR under neoliberalism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. While it offers opportunities for greater inclusivity and diversity in public discourse, it also presents significant challenges that need to be addressed. PR practitioners and scholars must navigate these complexities to harness the potential of PR democratization while mitigating its drawbacks.

4. The Future of Public Relations in a Neoliberal Context

As public relations continues to evolve in the neoliberal era, several trends and challenges are emerging that will shape the future of the field. These trends include the increasing importance of data-driven strategies, the need for ethical considerations, and the call for greater diversity and inclusivity in PR practice.

5.1 Data-driven PR strategies

In an age of big data and advanced analytics, public relations practitioners are increasingly leveraging data to inform their strategies, measure their impact, and refine their approaches. This data-driven approach aligns with the neoliberal emphasis on efficiency and competition, as organizations seek to optimize their PR efforts and stay ahead in a rapidly changing media landscape (Paine, 2011).

With the growing importance of data-driven PR, practitioners must develop new skills and capabilities, such as data analysis, digital marketing, and search engine optimization, to stay relevant in their field. Moreover, organizations must invest in the necessary infrastructure and tools to support these data-driven approaches (Watson & Zerfass, 2011).

5.2 Ethical considerations

As PR becomes more democratized and complex, ethical considerations have become increasingly critical. Issues such as misinformation, manipulation, and the concentration of power in the digital sphere call for a renewed focus on ethical PR practice (Edwards & Hodges, 2011).

PR practitioners and scholars must engage in ongoing discussions about the ethical implications of their work, develop guidelines and best practices, and hold themselves and their peers accountable for upholding ethical standards. This commitment to ethical PR will help to ensure the integrity and credibility of the profession in the face of evolving challenges (Bowen, 2007).

5.3 Diversity and inclusivity

The call for greater diversity and inclusivity in public relations is growing louder, both within the profession and in the broader society. PR practitioners must recognize and address the biases and power imbalances that exist within their field, and work towards creating more diverse and inclusive practices (Edwards & Pieczka, 2013).

This effort includes not only hiring and promoting diverse talent but also embracing diverse perspectives and approaches in PR strategy and decision-making. By fostering a more inclusive PR environment, organizations can better serve their increasingly diverse stakeholders and contribute to a more equitable society (Grunig, 2006).

In conclusion, the future of public relations in the neoliberal context will be shaped by the convergence of various trends and challenges, including data-driven strategies, ethical considerations, and the push for diversity and inclusivity. PR practitioners and scholars must continue to adapt and innovate in response to these forces, ensuring the ongoing relevance and impact of their field.

5.4 Integration of PR and other communication disciplines

Another emerging trend in the neoliberal context is the integration of public relations with other communication disciplines, such as marketing, advertising, and social media management. This integrated communication approach reflects the increasing complexity of the media landscape, where audiences are fragmented, platforms are numerous, and the boundaries between different forms of communication are blurring (Kitchen & Schultz, 2001). Integrated communication allows organizations to present a consistent message across multiple platforms, reach a wider audience, and leverage synergies between different

communication activities. However, this approach also requires PR practitioners to broaden their skill sets, understand various communication disciplines, and work closely with other communication professionals (Grunig & Grunig, 1998).

Social responsibility and sustainability

As society becomes increasingly concerned about social and environmental issues, organizations are expected to demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility and sustainability. This trend has significant implications for public relations, as PR practitioners play a key role in communicating their organizations' social responsibility initiatives, managing their reputations, and engaging with stakeholders on these issues (Kim & Reber, 2008).

In the neoliberal context, social responsibility and sustainability are not just ethical imperatives, but also strategic considerations. Organizations that demonstrate genuine commitment to these values can enhance their reputation, build trust with their stakeholders, and gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

5.5 The impact of AI and automation

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation is another trend that will shape the future of public relations in the neoliberal context. AI and automation can enhance PR practice by automating routine tasks, providing insights from large datasets, and personalizing communication. However, these technologies also raise concerns about job displacement, privacy, and the dehumanization of communication (Regan & Jesse, 2019).

PR practitioners must stay abreast of these technological developments, understand their implications, and adapt their strategies accordingly. At the same time, they must grapple with the ethical and societal issues raised by these technologies, ensuring that their use of AI and automation aligns with their ethical commitments and the expectations of their stakeholders (Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2015).

5. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) have emerged as a key instrument in the neoliberal toolbox, providing a mechanism to leverage private sector resources, expertise, and efficiency in delivering public services and infrastructure. They represent a collaborative effort between government entities and private sector companies, with each party contributing to the success of a common goal (Siemiatycki, 2010).

6.1 Rationale for PPPs

The rationale for PPPs often hinges on several key points. Firstly, they can provide a means of financing public services and infrastructure in times of fiscal constraint, allowing governments to make necessary investments without increasing public debt (Grimsey & Lewis, 2007). Secondly, the private sector is often seen as being more efficient and innovative than the public sector, and PPPs are seen as a way to harness these qualities for public benefit (Hodge & Greve, 2007). Lastly, PPPs can help mitigate risks associated with large public projects by sharing them with private sector partners (Bing, Akintoye, Edwards, & Hardcastle, 2005).

6.2 Types of PPPs

There are various types of PPPs, each with its own set of characteristics and goals. These include: concession contracts, where a private company is given the right to operate a public service for a certain period; Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) schemes, where a private entity constructs a facility and operates it for a specified period before transferring ownership to the government; and joint ventures, where the public and private sectors co-own and co-operate a service or facility (Yescombe, 2011).

6.3 Critiques of PPPs

Despite their potential benefits, PPPs have faced substantial criticism. Some critics argue that they can lead to a deterioration of public services, as profit-driven private companies may cut corners or fail to meet service standards (Bel, Fageda, & Warner, 2010). Others point to the lack of transparency and accountability in PPP arrangements, which can make it difficult for citizens to hold providers accountable for their performance (Wettenhall, 2005).

6.4 Future of PPPs

In the future, PPPs are likely to continue to play a significant role in public service provision, especially in sectors like infrastructure, healthcare, and education. However, there is a growing recognition that they must be managed effectively and held to high standards of transparency, accountability, and public interest to ensure their success (Roehrich, Lewis, & George, 2014).

In conclusion, Public-Private Partnerships represent a notable manifestation of neoliberal ideals in the realm of public service provision. While they offer potential benefits in terms of efficiency and innovation, their use also comes with significant challenges and controversies.

6. Neoliberalism's Influence on Public Relations Education

Neoliberalism has also shaped the landscape of public relations education. As the need for specialized PR practitioners grows, the demand for educational programs that provide the necessary skills and knowledge has increased. Universities and colleges have adapted their curricula and teaching methods to meet these needs, often with a strong focus on market-oriented skills and knowledge (Zerfass, Vercic, & Tench, 2016).

7.1 Market-Oriented Curriculum

In response to the demands of the neoliberal market, many PR educational programs have adopted a more practical, skills-based approach. These programs often emphasize areas such as data analytics, digital communication, strategic planning, and crisis management, which are highly valued in the contemporary PR industry. This shift towards a market-oriented curriculum reflects the neoliberal emphasis on economic productivity and competitiveness (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988).

7.2 The Role of Internships and Work Placements

Internships and work placements have become a crucial part of PR education in the neoliberal era. These opportunities allow students to gain hands-on experience, apply their learning in a real-world context, and develop connections with industry professionals. They also provide a way for students to showcase their skills and potential to prospective employers, enhancing their employability upon graduation (Todd, 2014).

7.3 Challenges and Critiques

While the neoliberal influence on PR education has helped to align academic programs with industry needs, it has also raised several challenges and critiques. Some scholars argue that the focus on market-oriented skills and knowledge can narrow the scope of PR education, neglecting important areas such as critical thinking, ethics, and social responsibility. There are also concerns about the increasing commodification of education, where students are seen as customers and education is seen as a product to be bought and sold (Couldry, 2010).

7.4 The Future of PR Education

Looking ahead, PR educators must strike a balance between meeting the practical needs of the industry and fostering a broader, more critical understanding of public relations. This might involve integrating more theoretical and critical perspectives into the curriculum, emphasizing ethical considerations, and encouraging students to engage with the societal implications of PR practice (McKie & Munshi, 2007).

In conclusion, neoliberalism has significantly shaped the landscape of PR education, steering it towards a more practical, market-oriented approach. While this shift has helped to meet the demands of the industry, it also presents challenges that need to be addressed to ensure a comprehensive and balanced PR education.

7. Criticisms

The intersection of public relations and neoliberalism has drawn substantial criticism. These criticisms are rooted in concerns about the potential for public opinion manipulation, the service of private interests at the expense of the wider public, and the ethical implications of these practices.

8.1 Manipulation of Public Opinion

One of the most prevalent criticisms is the potential for public relations within a neoliberal context to manipulate public opinion. Critics argue that PR, with its focus on shaping public perception, can be used to present a version of reality that serves the interests of the powerful, rather than reflecting the objective truth (L'Etang, 2008). This can include tactics such as "spin," where information is selectively presented or interpreted to create a particular impression, and "astroturfing," where artificial grassroots movements are created to influence public opinion. Demetrious demonstrates the mutually beneficial relationship between the neoliberal project and public relations. Public relations firms and neoliberal institutions have developed a discourse based on deceptive narratives that marginalize and undermine public dialogue in opposition to civil society and a deliberative public sphere. This endeavor restricts the social imaginary and our capacity to direct mass action. Her study demonstrates how to get past the warped public discourse we currently have. -- Robert Brulle, University of Brown "Kristin Demetrious has written a brilliant, unsettling, and incredibly readable treatise on how public relations language promotes the neo-liberal free market capitalist agenda and how, in doing so, it has constrained our collective imagination and ability to think and debate about alternative ways to be and organize society.

8.2 Serving the Interests of the Powerful

Another major criticism is that PR within a neoliberal context often serves the interests of the powerful at the expense of the wider public. This can happen when corporations use PR to shape public policy in their favor, or when governments use PR to justify policies that benefit the wealthy and disadvantage the poor (Moloney, 2006). Critics argue that this kind of PR can exacerbate inequalities, undermine democracy, and erode public trust. What is lacking in the neoliberal approach is any consideration of the perverse ways in which economic and political power are unevenly distributed. Security of rights to private property is justified by von Mises and Hayek as a necessary condition for the development of capitalism. For its initial rise, they have been correct. But the literature, even of the 1930s, on the modern corporation and the separation of ownership from control, is ignored.¹¹ Such division in the structure of corporations puts in question whether private corporate ownership is any longer a necessary, let alone a positive, feature of a modern market society.

The point here is that the state representing the public interest (as with nationalised companies) can act equally as well as, or even better than, thousands of individual shareholders who are powerless. In such cases, under free enterprise, managerial control remains unchecked and leads to enormous unjustifiable financial rewards to company executives.

The 'unfreedom' that people who do not own corporate property experience is not taken into account by neoliberals, who view ownership as increasing freedom. Hayek offers the choice of switching from private ownership to governmental ownership. He argues that state ownership would place the government "in a position where its actions must effectively

determine all other incomes." According to him, a wealthy and powerful society is nevertheless preferable to one in which wealth is solely accessible to the powerful.

The unequal personal distribution of private capital is unaddressed by giving people the choice to choose to be unequal (freedom of opportunity). Public accountability is a must for modern governments, but private firms are only answerable to their shareholders, who anticipate profits, and are managed by directors who control the money. Neoliberals support financial rewards as a motivator for effective job performance and champion the idea of the individualistic, creative, and successful entrepreneur. However, they fail to take into account the idle rich who live off of their inheritance or unearned earnings. The neoliberal position should limit inheritance since it discourages its recipients from seeking employment, in order to promote individual striving and innovation.

8.3 Ethical Implications

The ethical implications of these practices are also a point of contention. Some scholars argue that the use of PR to manipulate public opinion and serve the interests of the powerful is fundamentally unethical, violating principles of honesty, transparency, and respect for persons (Bowen, 2007). They call for a more ethical approach to PR, one that respects the autonomy and intelligence of the public, promotes open and honest communication, and serves the public interest.

The intersection of PR and neoliberalism raises significant ethical and societal issues. While PR can be a powerful tool for communication and persuasion, it can also be used in ways that are manipulative, self-serving, and detrimental to the public good. As such, it is crucial for PR practitioners and scholars to critically examine these practices and their implications, and to strive for a more ethical and socially responsible approach to PR.

8.4 Commodification of Information and Media

Under the influence of neoliberalism, public relations has been critiqued for the commodification of information and media. Here, PR plays a role in the creation of content that is not primarily for public enlightenment or societal good, but instead intended to serve corporate or governmental interests. This results in media content being dictated by the highest bidder, and not necessarily by the public interest. Critics argue that this leads to a distortion of the media landscape, where the voices of marginalized communities may be suppressed or ignored, and the power of the media may be unduly influenced by those with financial resources (Fuchs, 2010).

More recently, traditional media controlled by the super-rich have been joined by social media companies controlled by the super-rich, except that the latter are even less constrained in spreading misinformation. Thanks to section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, US-based companies cannot be held liable for third-party content hosted on their platforms – or for most of the other social harms they cause (Stiglitz, 2023). Sen sees market forces as a principal impetus to expanding the realm of freedom, but he does not accept that they can also be a major hindrance. States, for him, constitute the main threat to freedom. Hence, the informed and open discussion that Sen cherishes requires a 'free' press, one free from government control and censorship. The absence of official censorship is, of course, an important condition of a free society. But Development as Freedom skirts the likelihood that highly concentrated private ownership of the mass media will also shrink serious debate within narrow boundaries. Such concentrated media ownership is today a reality in virtually all liberal–capitalist societies, developed and developing. (Sandbrook, 2010)

8.5 Erosion of Democratic Processes

Closely linked to the commodification of information and the manipulation of public opinion is the concern that PR within the neoliberal context can contribute to the erosion of democratic processes. By controlling the narrative and limiting the diversity of voices heard, the ability of the public to make informed decisions can be compromised. Critics contend that this undermines the very foundation of a democratic society, which requires an informed citizenry for its functioning (Chomsky, 1988). Sen's view of democracy in a market society is difficult, just as his vision of the natural primacy and goodness of markets is. He makes the following claims: democracy is a component of the good life; it encourages responsive government; it does not impede economic progress but may instead create effective policy; and it enables individuals to freely determine their needs and priorities via open discourse. He makes a lot of uncontroversial claims. What is lacking, though, is an understanding of the serious constraints that centralized economic power within a steadily expanding global market economy places on democracy.

Not too long ago, eminent social scientists expressed a rekindled optimism about the prospects for increased democratic engagement. A book on "strong" democracies by Benjamin Barber was published, and it was immediately successful.¹ A book on participatory democracies by Jane Mansbridge was also published the year before.² The tone, however, appears to be shifting in the opposite direction in recent years, since the democratic crisis is now the subject of numerous books and articles. The literature highlights the problem of "democratic erosion": democracies that no longer fall apart suddenly but instead steadily erode over time. Democracies today are being undermined piece by piece from within rather than surrendering from one day to the next to large-scale rioting or a military coup. through little,

8.6 The Public Interest

Finally, the intersection of PR and neoliberalism has been criticized for its potential to neglect or distort the public interest. In the quest to promote corporate or governmental agendas, the needs and interests of the public may be overlooked or misrepresented. This can have significant societal implications, as the public relies on accurate and impartial information to make informed decisions and participate fully in democratic processes (Davis, 2002).

In summary, these criticisms underscore the need for a critical examination of the role of public relations within the neoliberal context. To ensure that PR practices contribute positively to society, it is essential to consider these issues and work towards a more ethical, inclusive, and democratic approach to public relations.

Conclusion

The intersection of public relations and neoliberalism is a complex and multifaceted subject, with far-reaching implications for society, politics, and the economy. This article has explored the various ways in which neoliberal principles have influenced and been implemented within the field of PR, including the use of strategic communication, the rise of public-private partnerships, and changes in PR education.

However, it is clear that this intersection also poses significant challenges and ethical dilemmas. Criticisms related to the manipulation of public opinion, the service of private interests at the expense of the wider public, and the potential erosion of democratic processes highlight the need for careful and critical consideration of PR practices within a neoliberal context.

There is a growing recognition within the field of PR that it must not only adapt to the realities of the neoliberal market but also consider the wider societal implications of its practices. This involves a delicate balancing act: on one hand, PR must meet the demands of businesses and

governments in a highly competitive, globalized economy; on the other hand, it must fulfill its ethical obligations to the public, promoting transparency, accountability, and respect for democratic processes.

As we move forward, the challenge for PR practitioners and scholars will be to navigate this complex landscape in a way that not only serves the immediate needs of clients and employers but also contributes positively to society. This will require ongoing critical examination, thoughtful discussion, and a commitment to ethical and socially responsible practice.

In essence, the intersection of public relations and neoliberalism presents both opportunities and challenges. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in shaping a future for PR that is not only successful in its professional goals but also in serving the broader public interest.

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